Chapter Two

The Swinging Sixties passed us by in Israel. There were no love-ins. None of us smoked pot. We never saw the Beatles on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. In fact, we didn't get television until 1966, and no color TV for a decade after that. I can't say that I was surprised to learn, when the official archives were opened a couple of years ago, that a committee of moral arbiters in the Israeli Ministry of Education actually vetoed plans for the Beatles to perform in Tel Aviv. "No intrinsic artistic value," the ruling read. "And their concerts provoke mass hysteria."

There was an almost puritanical atmosphere at the time, and it was rarely questioned, much less challenged. It seemed perfectly in keeping with the country as it then was: young, frill-less, only beginning to emerge from the years of austerity that had followed the 1948 war. The ration coupons I remembered from my childhood were, finally, being phased out. New agricultural ventures, such as cotton-growing, provided a foundation for a fledgling manufacturing sector. Major infrastructure projects were underway – made possible largely by an agreement with West Germany for nearly a billion dollars in "reparation" payments for the Holocaust. But no one in Israel at the start of the 1960s could be described as rich. And while the first real social divisions were beginning to show – the ones I'd sensed, as a child, in our treatment of the Yemeni workers on the kibbutz – even among the poorest Israelis there was a remarkable degree of shared pride in the fact that the Jewish state had been created. There was a shared sense of purpose, too, in ensuring that it survived and thrived. This was not a climate in which you were likely to

encounter a spirit of rebelliousness.

Except, as it would turn out, in the armed forces.

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My military service did not start encouragingly. I reported for duty on the second Sunday of November 1959, three months before my eighteenth birthday. We were inducted at a former British military base near Tel Hashomer, not far from Lod airport. It is still where new recruits report. Nowadays, however, the processing takes a matter of hours. Back then, we were poked and prodded and interviewed for nearly three weeks. And in my case, the procedure ended with my second bitter disappointment in barely as many months. I'd already had to abandon any hope of becoming a pilot. Now my second choice – a tank unit – was taken away as well. This was not because of anything I did or said during my evaluation process. It was simply because there were too many candidates for the tanks.

We were all stood in rows as our assignments were read out, chosen purely by order in the alphabet. When they called me, I looked up, and was told while I was indeed being sent to the army's main tank force, the Seventh Brigade, I was going to one of its armored personnel carrier units. The APC groups were, at the time, equipped with lumbering, World War Two-vintage half-tracks. They were among the last places that kids in the "good" army intakes wanted to serve.

Our base was in the Negev Desert, just outside Beersheva. I knew, of course,

that *tironut* – basic training – would be tough. That was the point: to make us into strong, disciplined soldiers. But at least at first, it was harder on me than on a lot of the others. I was still just five-feet-four-inches tall. I weighed about a hundred-and-twenty pounds, and by no means all, or even most, of that was muscle. In addition to a grueling obstacle course, at which I was almost comically inept, we would hike for miles into the desert. And as if the physical demands weren't enough, the corporal in charge of our unit of a dozen trainees had a mean streak that sometimes bordered on sadism. It was directed at two of us in particular: myself and a guy from the north of Israel, the only two kibbutzniks. The aim was obviously to make us break. At times, it was only our raw stubbornness that ensured that we never did.

Still, there were moments of satisfaction. One of them came the day we arrived, when we were run through a drill on disassembling, reassembling and firing an Uzi. To the astonishment of the others, the whole process took me about eight seconds. Of course, I'd already had considerable, if not strictly legal, practice back in Mishmar Hasharon. I also took pleasure in the fact that, little by little, I got stronger. I not only managed eventually to master the obstacle course. I built up to where I could handle our 10-mile runs – complete with our rifles and 25-pound backpacks – from our camp to the moshav of Nevatim and back again. And while many of our desert hikes were deadeningly uninteresting, there were exceptions: above all, a two-week series of planning and reconnaissance exercises in the sand dunes around the southern port city of Ashkelon. We were split into smaller groups. The premium was on using our powers of reason, and initiative, to work out the best way of reaching a particular target, or neutralizing an obstacle. On a couple of occasions, they

took us to a remote area at night to see whether we could find our way back to the unit's encampment. It was clear to me that it was *this* kind of challenge, and the freedom to puzzle out answers to a problem rather than just follow a set of instructions, that I most enjoyed. It was equally clear to me that this was not the Seventh Brigade's idea of a model soldier.

Then, one moonless night in late February 1960, everything began to change. The first sign that anything extraordinary was happening was a sudden movement of soldiers and weapons and tanks and APCs inside our base. The operational units obviously knew what was going on. We trainees were initially left to gaze and guess, and stay out of the way. Still, the sense of urgency around us made it vanishingly unlikely that this was just some kind of exercise.

By the time it had all run its course – in a near-war with Egypt, from which both sides fortunately retreated – it would become known as the Rotem Crisis. Today, I doubt that a single Israeli army recruit could tell you what it was about, or even that it happened. But for almost a decade afterwards, it would have a huge effect on Israel's entire military and intelligence establishment – and on the unexpected path my own career, and my life, was about to take.

The crisis had begun a couple of days earlier, at a diplomatic reception in Tel Aviv, against the background of continuing border skirmishes in the wake of the 1956 war. For our European allies, the obvious military success of three years earlier had become an embarrassing political failure. Barely had our invasion of Sinai begun, when both the British and French found themselves in effect forced by President Eisenhower to pull out. For Israel, however, the balance sheet was more positive. True, President Nasser initially responded by closing

the Suez Canal. But an internationally backed post-war arrangement resulted in the stationing of a UN buffer force in the Sinai, and an assurance that both the canal and the Straits of Tiran, our southern gateway to the Red Sea, would be open to Israeli ships. From a security standpoint, moreover, Israel now knew that our paratroopers and tank units could take on, and defeat, the largest and most powerful of our Arab enemies.

Yet the fedayeen raids had continued. And specially trained Israeli units were hitting back with increasing force against the Arab states giving them support, shelter or sanctuary. Most of the reprisal raids were against Jordan. But in the north, we were also engaging with the Syrians, in an attempt to stop their artillery fire on kibbutzim from atop the Golan Heights. As for Egypt, Nasser still issued occasional verbal threats. His post-1956 political union with Syria was also a matter of concern. But the assumption in Israel was that, at least for now, he would do all he could to avoid actually going to war.

That was what made what happened at the cocktail party in Tel Aviv all the more alarming. Among the Israelis who were there was Chaim Herzog, the head of Israeli military intelligence. Almost as soon as he arrived at the reception, he was approached by a man he knew well: the CIA station chief in Tel Aviv. There had been an escalation in our clashes with the Syrians over recent weeks, and some predictable rhetorical flourishes from Nasser, but Herzog, like other Israeli military and political leaders, neither expected, nor wanted, any of this to lead to outright war. Neither did the CIA man, which was no doubt why he asked Herzog what he made of the fact that the Egyptians had moved two of their most battle-ready divisions forward toward the Suez Canal. Herzog was a natural diplomat: he would later become Israel's ambassador to the UN. So I'm

sure he came up with a suitably woolly reply, about how this was obviously a situation that would have to be closely monitored. But the startling fact was that neither he, nor anyone else in Israel, had known anything at all about the Egyptian troop movements. When a reconnaissance flight the next day confirmed the redeployment, and Ben-Gurion and his generals began scrambling for an appropriate response, the army's then chief of operations, Yitzhak Rabin, put the unhappy situation best, in a note to the commander of the air force. "We've been caught with our pants down."

For reasons I've never been able to discover, the codename for Israel's response was "broom" – in Hebrew, *rotem*. Ben-Gurion was already worried that the clashes with Syria risked dragging both sides into a full-scale conflict. He now recognized that we would have to deploy a counter-force in the south, in case it turned out that Nasser was planning an attack. But he was leery about doing anything that would provoke one. So he vetoed the idea of a full mobilization of our reserves. But he did authorize a more limited call-up, of about 7,000 reserve soldiers. He placed the air force on alert. And he ordered the four brigades that were responsible for the defense of southern Israel to move, within a space of 24 hours, to positions just a few miles back from our desert border with Egypt. He also called in the editors of Israeli newspapers to tell them that, under the terms of military censorship regulations which he had happily inherited from the Brits, they were to keep all of this absolutely secret.

My own unlikely involvement began on the evening the emergency deployment began, in a meeting of our full APC training platoon, about 30 or 40 teenage recruits in all. All around us, there were signs of operational preparations: one of the forces being deployed was the Seventh Brigade. But we

had also been ordered to send out overnight munitions convoys to equip the other three brigades in the hastily assembled border force.

The problem was that there was no one on the base with the expertise, experience and local knowledge to lead the supply columns.

Our platoon commander, a prim, remote figure we'd seen only once or twice since beginning our *tironut*, stood in front of us, explaining the need for the convoys. Then, very sternly, he asked: "Any volunteers?" We all looked around us. But none of us raised our hands. "Come on," the commander said. "One of you must have grown up around here. That means the first 25 miles will be familiar territory." He left unspoken the obvious postscript: the need to negotiate the final five or ten miles, through open desert, finding just the right area, near a border with Egypt that wasn't even marked. Still, no one volunteered. "Can't *any* of you guys just lead a convoy of a few trucks?

I'm not sure what possessed me. But I thought to myself: yes, I probably can. Although nothing so literal passed through my mind, I realized that I had been scouting and navigating in one way or another since those first evenings in the kibbutz orange groves with Yigal. I'd also done *Yam le Yam*, the three-day trek from the Mediterranean to the Sea of Galilee, as well as a series of similar expeditions as I got older. And while I'd never lived in the Negev, the moshav where I had worked with Yigal after getting kicked out of high school was close to the route which I assumed the convoy would take: west towards Tze'elim and Rafah, skirting the bottom end of the Gaza Strip, and then cutting south into the desert to an area somewhere near the frontier. Not only had I worked in fields not far from there. Often, Yigal and I would not finish until after nightfall, at

which point we'd drive our tractors back to the room where we were staying. The first couple of nights, I'd been worried about getting lost. Yet very soon, I realized the fear was irrational. I had driven the same roads in daytime. They didn't suddenly change shape or direction when the sun went down.

So I raised my hand.

If the platoon leader was surprised, or worried, he didn't show it. He motioned me forward, and led me across the base to the office of the company commander – the guy in charge of all of the several hundred new recruits on the base. When we entered his office and stood in front of him, I was surprised to see that he wasn't much taller than I was. But he was built like a bull. "Can you lead a convoy?" he asked. "Yes, sir," I said. "Of course, I'll need a map. And a compass. But if you can give me that, I think I can."

"Why?" he prodded. I'd done scouting, I told him. I was good with maps. "Come on then," he said, and I followed him and the platoon commander into another nearby building – to see the overall commander of the Seventh Brigade. One of their aides must have phoned ahead, because he was clearly expecting us. Still, I could see the surprise in his eyes when I entered and he looked at me: a mere kid, only just turned eighteen but looking closer to 15, my uniform sagging on my slender frame. He stared at the officers, then back at me, then back at the officers again, as if trying to judge from their degree of confidence whether he was about to approve something utterly crazy. But what choice did he have? Three convoys had to be sent out within the next couple of hours. So far, with me, he had a sum total of one guy to lead them. Whatever his doubts, he still had to find two more soldiers for the other ones.

"OK," he said, and waved us out of his office.

The column consisted of eight huge, American-made six-wheelers, packed with munitions and other supplies. I was in the lead truck. The driver was a reservist in his mid-30s. So were most of the troops in the rest of the transports: one driver and one other soldier in each. A staff sergeant, riding in the second vehicle, was in theoretical command. But, surreal though it felt, I was actually in charge – by virtue of the fact that I was the only person who could, conceivably, get us to the right place.

The first few miles weren't difficult. We drove on the main road south from the camp and then cut west, in the direction of the border, on a secondary road. It got trickier once we moved on to a series of hard-packed dirt tracks. Then came the real challenge: heading into the desert, through a vast expanse of sand. Every half-mile or so, I waved the convoy to a halt, just to confirm we were going in the right direction. It didn't take long for me to realize that the compass was useless from inside the six-wheeler. There was too much metal around, and it distorted the reading. So I would walk fifty or sixty yards into the sand and brush. I would crouch down, take out my army-issue penlight and get the compass reading, then look for the faint glow of towns or settlements, and figure out where we were on the map. The further we went, however, the darker it got. For the final few miles, I asked all the trucks to dim their lights, so that I could at least get some fix on what lay immediately ahead of us. Although the map didn't show it, there were places where we had to weave among sudden rises and falls in the dunes and clumps of acacia trees. Finally, after what must have been three or four hours in all, I signaled the convoy to stop. I climbed out and walked back to the staff sergeant and said: "We're here."

In fact, I had no way of knowing for sure. There was no landmark we had been told to look for. The desert looked the same, whether on our side or the Egyptians' of the unmarked frontier. But from the compass and the map, I was pretty confident that we were at least close. And I figured that if we pushed things any further, we might do the one thing which, at all costs, we had to avoid: actually crossing into Egypt. The agreement, when we had set off from Beersheva, was that once we had got to our designated position, we would stop, get a few hours' sleep, and await the arrival of a command jeep which, once daylight came, would be able to follow our tracks through the desert. Barely two hours after we'd stopped, a jeep did bob its way over a nearby dune and draw up beside us. The officer inside looked at the staff sergeant, and nodded. Then, he turned to me. "Unbelievable," he said. "We're where we need to be."

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If this were a Hollywood movie, there would now be a neat, linear progression between my modest navigational triumph and my escape from the prospect of spending the next couple of years driving an APC. But this was still the army, and I was still just a teenage recruit.

There were, in fact, some subtle signs of approval – mixed, I sensed, with surprise – over the fact that I'd managed to get the convoy to the border without getting lost, or starting a war. The platoon commander patted me on the back when I got back. For a few days, the officer in charge of our unit even stopped his harassment. But the main change was inside me. I now knew that there *were*

parts of army service which I would be good at, challenges I'd find motivating, areas where I could actually make a contribution. The trouble was that I didn't know how, or whether, I'd be able to persuade my superiors of this. And even if I could, I had no clear idea what part of the army, if any, would need, or want, the kind of soldier that I wanted to be.

Yet none of this would turn out to matter. Within several weeks, I no longer had to worry about finding my own niche in the army. Because it found me.

The first sign that my luck was changing came in early April. Under army regulations, every trainee was supposed to get a five-day leave halfway through basic training. Because of the Rotem Crisis, ours had been pushed back. But shortly before the Passover holiday, I headed north to Mishmar Hasharon. Especially in the early years of the state, teenage military service was a nearly universal rite of passage. Ambivalent though I still felt when I imagined the next couple of years baking inside an APC in the Negev, I can't deny that the idea of returning to the kibbutz, in uniform, at least a bit stronger and bulkier than when I'd left, made me feel a certain kind of pride. I could certainly sense pride in my parents, and my younger brothers. It felt as if I had now truly begun life as an adult. I was also, however, very, very tired. I spent the first couple of days at home mostly sleeping.

The third night, I was in the dining hall with a half-dozen schoolmates-turned-soldiers when a guy named Avraham Ramon sat down and joined us. Avraham was a *yeled chutz*, one of the "boys from outside" who had arrived when Mishmar Hasharon pulled us out of the regional high school and opened up classes on the kibbutz to other kids from around the country. Most of the

newcomers initially gravitated to one another rather than to us native kibbutznikim. We, after all, been together since infancy. But over time, the divisions began to blur, and I became friendly with a number of new boys, Avraham among them. He was from Ashkelon. He was especially popular with the girls: strikingly handsome, a mix of blue eyes which I suppose he got from his mother, and a more Middle Eastern cast he got from his father, whose family had originated in Greece. I was also impressed because he spoke a bit of Arabic.

Now, he, too, was in the army. But I was surprised to see him back. Very few of the *yeladim chutz*, once they went off to military service, returned to Mishmar Hasharon. They had no real reason to consider it home. Still, it was good to see him, and as we were leaving the dining hall, he turned to me and said: "How's your *tironut*?"

"Hard," I replied. "And boring."

He smiled, and then asked: "How would you feel about joining a *sayeret*?"

The use of the term sounded strange. The question itself, too, since I was still not out of my basic training on APCs. In Hebrew, *sayeret*, means "reconnaissance unit". In fact, it's the name given to elite companies within the main fighting forces which specialize in a range of operations, not just reconnaissance, behind enemy lines. These days, there are nearly a dozen of them. Then, there were only two of any note: *Sayeret Golani*, the strike force of the Golani Brigade in the north of the country; and the truly elite one, *Sayeret Tzanhanim*, the parachutists' company which we kids on the kibbutz knew about, and admired, because Yigal Garber was one of its fighters.

"Which *sayeret*?" I asked.

"It's called *Sayeret Matkal*," he said. "Are you interested?"

I'd never heard of it. No one had. The name didn't help either: "*matkal*" was simply the Hebrew word for the army general staff. So I asked him what *Sayeret Matkal* did.

"I can't tell you," he said. "But are you interested?"

The air of mystery made it seem only more enticing. Still, even without the mystery, my answer was a no-brainer. No matter what this *sayeret* did, it had to be a step up from what lay ahead of me in the Negev.

"Yeah. Sure," I said.

The sense of intrigue deepened when, the day before I returned to my unit, the two older members of our band of Mishmar Hasharon "rogues" – Ido and Moshe – showed up. Since they were older, they had already completed their basic training. They were now active members of Israel's storied parachutists' brigade, though not of its *sayeret*. Still, I figured they might at least have heard of the unit Avraham had mentioned. When I asked them about *Sayeret Matkal*, in as matter-of-fact a tone as I could muster, Moshe, laughing, eyebrows arched, said: "What? They want *you*?" No, I assured them. I was just curious. And so were they. The only thing they knew for sure was that the unit existed: two friends from their parachute company, Sephardi Jews from Yemen, had suddenly disappeared one morning. They'd since discovered that the pair of them had been recruited by this new *sayeret*. They had also heard rumors about the unit: that it specialized in crossing Israel's borders and operating inside Arab territory. One of their training tests was said to involve infiltrating into the Egyptian-held Gaza Strip, seeing a movie, and returning with the ticket stub to

prove they had been there. I couldn't help feeling that, if true, it sounded a lot like the "missions" which Ido, Moshe and the other "rogues" had assigned ourselves on the kibbutz.

"But, they want *you*?" Moshe asked again.

The fact was that I didn't really know. At this point, all that had happened was that a friend, who was evidently part of the new *sayeret,* had asked me if I'd be interested. For a frustrating week or so, once I got back to Beersheva, nothing happened. Then, however, things moved quickly, with a series of unorthodox meetings with what seemed to be increasingly senior officers. The first was on a Friday near the end of April. I was heading back home for the weekend, and was told to stop in Ramat Gan, at the army's main personnel headquarters. I was to report to *Maka Eser*, the small wooden hut reserved for intelligence units. When I got there, I was greeted by two men who, though I'd never met them of course, I had heard of. Almost every young soldier had. Sami Nachmias and Shmi Ben-Zvi had been part of the "reprisal attack" units in the early 1950s, infiltrating into Jordan in what Americans of a later era might have called "shock and awe" ground assaults against the towns and villages from which fedayeen raids were being staged.

At first, Israel had tried to hit back against the fedayeen with our regular army units. But they'd proven almost totally, and sometimes embarrassingly, ineffective. One raid into the West Bank had been thwarted, if that's the right word, by a chance encounter with a couple of men out walking, armed with old hunting rifles. Within the military command, and the upper reaches of government too, a concern grew that our young state, with its ideal of a newly

self-reliant and self-confident kind of Jew, was good at only one kind of fighting: defensive, existential, do-or-die. The kind required in the War of Independence. The answer which Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan came up with in 1953 was to train a hand-picked group of kibbutniks and moshavniks as a commando unit. It was called Unit 101. It was led by a brash young veteran from the 1948 war named Ariel Sharon.

Yet while the 101 attacks transformed the situation military – bearing out Dayan's argument that the only effective long-term response to the incursions was to make the Arab states supporting the fedayeen pay a heavy price – it raised other questions. Ground operations on the scale mounted by Sharon and his commandos inevitably killed not just enemy soldiers, or fedayeen, but civilians too. This brought international pressure. It also raised an enormously difficult question inside Israel: how to reconcile military imperatives with the moral principle known in Hebrew as *tohar haneshek*. The phrase means "purity of arms". It was made part of the doctrine of the new Israeli army in 1948, an effort to wire in a sense of Jewish ethics and morality, and it explicitly required Israeli soldiers to use minimum necessary force and do all they could to avoid civilian casualties.

To this day, balancing Israel's security requirements with *tohar haneshek* remains a huge challenge. In fact, there have been times when I have found it a nearly impossible challenge: for instance, when I was Defense Minister during our 2008-2009 war in Gaza. Our enemy was not a regular army, but the Islamist movement Hamas, and they were using the *impurity* of arms as a deliberate battle plan, firing missiles into Israel from apartment blocks or from just outside schools and hospitals. For Dayan, in the 1950s, the practical challenge of trying

to avoid civilian casualties was less complex. But the reason that both he and Ben-Gurion were reluctant to rein in the commandos was because they feared that doing so risked projecting weakness to our Arab neighbors, all of which were still vowing to fight, and to eliminate the Jewish state.

Dayan went further: he told Israelis that at least some Arabs – the Palestinians, though we didn't call them that at the time – had every reason to fight us. Even as a 14-year-old on the kibbutz, I remember being struck by the force of the message he delivered at the funeral of a young Israeli security guard who was killed by infiltrators from Gaza in the spring of 1956. We should *not* blame the people who had killed him, he said. After all, they had been "sitting in the refugee camps" while we were "transforming the lands and the villages where they and their fathers dwelt." We needed instead to at ourselves. We needed to "see, in all its brutality, the destiny of our generation." If Israel was to survive, we would have to remain "prepared and armed, strong and determined." That, for him, was why Israel needed Unit 101, and why 101 had to operate pretty much with no holds barred. In fact, after it had been operating for only four or five months, he supplanted it with a larger commando force, Batallion 890 of the parchutists' brigade, under Sharon's command.

Both Nachmias and Ben-Zvi had been among the first recruits to Unit 101. They had gone on to serve in the commando batallion as well. And needless to say, it struck me as strange that they had now asked to see a mere teenager, still not even out of basic training. But each of them shook my hand. They motioned me towards the passanger seat of their Jeep. Nachmias drove. Ben-Zvi sat in back. As soon as we were outside the base, we pulled over.

"Is it true you can pick locks?" Nachmias asked.

Yes, I said, even more puzzled now about where this was heading. Taking my ever-ready picks out of my pocket, I said: "Do you want a demonstration." Ben-Zvi smiled. No, he said. They just wanted to know. "Is it true you can navigate? Read maps?" he asked. Yes, I said. When they asked whether I'd learned navigation in my *tironut*, I said: "Not really. I was in a scout group. I did a lot of it." The rest of the conversation was more what you'd expect in an interview, if that was what this was: basic biographical background. Then, as suddenly as our conversation had begun, it was over. They ushered me out of jeep, and Nechmias said: "OK. You will hear from us."

I didn't, however. Yet as basic training was winding down, I was told to report one Saturday morning to an address in Tzahalah, the neighborhood in north Tel Aviv where a lot of military officers lived. It was a small place, with a metal gate outside and a carefully tended garden. I was met at the door by a major, who introduced himself as Avraham Arnan. He was not much taller than I was, but square-jawed, with a scar running down one cheek. Though we would go on to become close friends, at that point I knew nothing about him. Still, the scar seemed to say: this man is a soldier, a guy who has seen real battle. He ushered me in. We sat at a low table on the edge of his little living room. He unfurled a detailed map of Jerusalem and the surrounding hills. He pointed to a spot on the southwest of the city. Then he drew a curving line with his finger, through the hills, to a second point. "You know how to read a map?" he asked. When I nodded, he said: "I want you to describe to me – just as if you were walking on this line I showed you – exactly what you see, as you make your way to the place I marked." I did. I used the elevation lines on the map as a

guide, and the positioning of the individual hills and woods and villages, and I imagined how each stage on the walk would look. When I was finished, his only response was non-verbal: the hint of a smile. When he spoke, it wasn't about the map. It was – again – about picking locks. "How did you learn?" he asked. I explained how I'd cut into the locks, how I'd figured out how they worked, and gradually fashioned a set of tools to open them. "Thank you," he said. "You can return to your unit."

Though he hadn't actually said so – though he hadn't actually said much of anything – I had a sense that I'd just had the Sayeret Matkal equivalent of my final interview. I felt, or certainly hoped, I'd done enough to be accepted into this mysterious new unit. Discreetly digging around once I'd returned to Beersheva for my final week of *tironut*, I discovered that Arnan had fought, as a young officer in the 1948 war, in the hills around Jerusalem. He would have known intimately the terrain I'd described in his living room. That, I guessed, explained the half-smile. Still, the waiting for my formal orders was tough. Until I knew for sure, the possibility remained that I'd spend the next couple of years learning how to handle an APC, rather than in a *sayeret* that seemed most interested in whether, and how, I could coax open a padlock.

Even the news, when it came, just a day before the end of basic training, was unorthodox. I was told to report, again, to *Maka Eser* in Ramat Gan. When I arrived, a Jeep was waiting. An ordinary soldier, who said nothing beyond a gruff hello, drove me to the place barely 15 minutes away which would become the center of my life for more than a decade.

It was a military base – a huge, sprawling, base called Sirkin. About a mile

from the international airport in Lod, it had been built by the British in the Second World War for the RAF. Since 1948, the main part of the base – its dozens of buildings, the hard-packed dirt training areas, skirted by fringes of tall trees – had become the main training center for Israeli officers, the nearest thing we had to a West Point. There was still an airbase, however. It had a dozen old, wooden Mosquito fighters and a few prop-driven military transport planes, which our air force used for training. At the very far end, set back from a criss-cross of runways, was a jumble of other structures. A pair of domed concrete shelters, like stunted tunnels, which had been used to store munitions during the war. Four tents, each of which could house a dozen people. A couple of field toilets. A large, high-roofed building that had obviously been a hangar. And a single-story wooden edifice which, I would soon discover, contained offices: for Avraham Arnan, his two main operational officers, and a secretary.

This was Sayeret Matkal, although the first thing I learned was that no one, outside the handful of senior officers in army headquarters who had approved setting it up, was supposed to know we existed. When we would enter the main gate at Sirkin, and the guard asked where we were going, we would reply with a codename Avraham had come up with: *Kav Chamesh*: "Line Five," which was the main bus route between Tel Aviv and Petach Tikvah, the suburb whose least well-off neighborhoods lay just beyond our perimeter fence.

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There is no way to explain what Sayeret Matkal was like at the beginning

without describing how, and why, it came to be. Its heart and soul was Avraham Arnan. He was the one who came up with the idea. It was he who somehow convinced friends in the top brass to go along with it. And he nurtured it through infancy despite deep skepticism – tinged with occasional jealousy – among other commanders that it would ever amount to anything. But the reason we survived long enough to prove the doubters wrong was because of two, now pretty much forgotten, intelligence setbacks which dealt painful blows to Israel's confidence that it could win, or survive, a future war with its Arab enemies.

One of these shocks, still fresh in everybody's mind, was the Rotem Crisis. Any armed force, anywhere, would have been unsettled by being unaware of a sudden forward deployment by its most military powerful enemy. But for Israel, being "caught with our pants down" had far more serious implications. When Ben-Gurion had put in place our defense strategy after the 1948 war, he realized that a young, small nation like ours, especially as it was struggling to get on its feet economically, could not possibly rely on a large standing army. Instead, we would have a small, professional core, measured in the mere tens of thousands at the time of Rotem. The bulk of our forces would be reservists: soldiers and officers who had completed their basic service, and would then spend a month each year re-familiarizing themselves with, and training on, their tanks or APCs or their aircraft. If and when we had to fight a war, the assumption was that we would be able to bring our forces up to full strength within 24 to 48 hours.

But for any of this to work, early warning of an enemy attack was absolutely essential. Good intelligence was not only important. It was critical. And while there were various ways of getting intelligence – local agents, for instance; or

keeping tabs on the Arab news media – reliable, real-time *military intelligence* would have to involve our being able to cross over our borders and infiltrate, undetected, into our Arab neighbors' territory.

And that was something that we had *stopped* doing. Since the middle of the 1950s. Because of a trauma that was in some ways even more painful than Rotem. This crisis involved not Nasser, but the Syrians, who, although less powerful militarily, presented a more immediate threat. Our border with Egypt consisted mostly of a vast expanse of desert. In the north, however, the towns and settlements of the Galilee and the upper Jordan Valley crouched literally underneath Syria's Golan Heights: a 1,500-foot-high volcanic plateau which rose gradually towards the 9,000-foot peak we called Mount Hermon. In Arabic, it was known as *Jebel al-Sheikh*, the old man's mountain, for its frosting of snow. We did have a limited, fairly primitive, program of aerial reconnaissance. But the mere geography of the north meant that we were virtually blind to any sudden movement by the Syrians' forward forces on the Golan. Nor would we have any way of knowing that fighter jets had taken off from bases around Damascus, a few dozen miles back from the Heights, until they were already bearing down on Israel.

So our military intelligence chiefs decided to take covert action: by planting an eavesdropping device recently developed by their "technological department" on the Golan itself. The assumption was that if that worked, we would then try to do the same thing in the Sinai. The problem was that Israel, at that point, had no intelligence unit with any direct experience of operating, undetected, across our borders. We did, however, now have several years' experience of *attacking* across our borders, with the commandos of Sharon's

Unit 101 and its larger successor, Batallion 890.

The man chosen to lead the bugging mission was still just 21 years old. But he had a reputation within the Israel military that outstripped even Sharon's, and nearly rivaled that of Dayan himself. Dayan would later call him "our finest commando, our best soldier ever." His name was Meir Har-Zion. Tall, lanky, with a shock of dark hair, he was born just north of Tel Aviv but had moved as a teenager to the kibbutz of Ein Harod in the Galilee, where he soon developed twin passions: writing poetry and hiking with his younger sister, Shoshana, around the surrounding countryside. They had a particular fondness for sneaking across the border into Syria or Jordan. Twice, the two of them were captured by the Syrians. They were let go the first time, perhaps because Shoshana was then only 13, but on the second occasion, in 1951, their release required delicate negotiations, through the UN. Apparently undaunted, Meir soon afterwards trekked 25 miles into Jordan with his girlfriend and managed to reach the ancient Nabatean city of Petra – an exploit that became a part of Israeli youth culture, and also helped explain why Har-Zion was Sharon's very first recruit into Unit 101.

Now, late one night in the spring of 1954, he led four of his comrades onto the Golan Heights. They rigged their bugging unit to the top of a telephone pole a mile or so from the Syrians' main base on the Heights. They buried the bulky transmitter at the foot of the pole, and made their way back into Israel. And it worked. Israel could now hear all Syrian military communications on the Golan.

The hitch, however, was that, with the limits of 1950s technology, the transmitter's batteries needed to be replaced every four or five weeks. Twice

more, in the summer and autumn of 1954, Har-Zion and his team sneaked back into Syria. They kept the intelligence flowing.

But Meir was still a crucial part of Israel's commando operations. He was in charge of Company A, the crack force in Sharon's expanded batallion. In May 1954, he and Sharon had led a 10-man strike team against Jibna, near Hebron on the West Bank. In June, he commanded a surprise attack on a Jordanian army camp near Qalqilya, in which one member of his unit was taken prisoner. In July and August, he organized a series of West Bank attacks to take Jordanian soldiers and policemen prisoner and swap them for the captured Israeli.

So far, Har-Zion had managed to lead the Golan intelligence infiltrations as well. But that was clearly not sustainable. There had to be a danger that, sooner or later, the Syrians might intercept one of the Golan missions. The last thing Dayan wanted was to lose the country's leading commando officer while he was trying to replace a few batteries in a transmitter.

So it was decided to hand over the missions to the main army force in the north, the Golani Brigade. In early December 1954, three commandos from Har-Zion's Company A – led by one of his deputy commanders, Meir Yacobi – joined three members of the Golani Brigade for a joint mission onto the Heights. The idea itself made sense: to have Yacobi, who had been on all three of the earlier operations with Meir Har-Zion, operate alongside the men from the Golani Brigade, who would now be taking over. The planning and execution, however, were a shambles. The unit had not even conducted a single joint exercise before setting off. From the outset, there was also confusion about who was actually in charge. Technically, since the head of the Golani team,

Lieutenant Meir Moses, outranked Yacobi, he was in command. But unlike Yacobi, he hadn't been on the earlier operations, and had never done anything remotely similar. It was set up for an accident waiting to happen. And it did. Barely a half-mile onto the Heights, they were stopped by a Syrian patrol. Had this been a purely commando operation, "101 rules" would have applied: if you were intercepted at any point, you asked no questions, gave no answers. You opened fire. But the Golani Brigade men, when told by the Syrian patrol to drop their weapons and lie down, did just that. Yacobi and the commandos did open fire, but in the ensuing chaos, all of them were captured. They were taken back to the main Golan Heights town of Quneitra, and then on to Damascus, where they were interrogated. And tortured.

Unlike Rotem, which Ben-Gurion's stern words to the editors had kept out of the newspapers, there was no hiding this setback. One of the Golani soldiers was a 19-year-old named Uri Ilan. He was the oldest child of Fayge Ilanit, a Mapam member of the Israeli Knesset, who Ben-Gurion and the whole of parliament had known personally for years. The group's captivity, and the torture, dragged on for weeks. The Israelis would not be returned home, in fact, until March 1956. By then things had, if possible, turned out to be even worse than feared. Uri Ilan took his own life – though managing to secrete a suicide note into his uniform. It read: *Lo bagadti*. "I did not betray anything."

Yacobi, once it became clear that their operation was blown, offered to lead the Syrians to the bugging device. He knew that the buried transmitter was equipped with explosives which were set to detonate if it was tampered with, which he planned to do when he and the Syrians got there: suicide, but with a military purpose. At least the Syrians wouldn't get hold of the equipment. But

the detonator didn't work.

From that point on, our military intelligence chiefs hadn't dared even to suggest sending other Israelis behind Syrian lines, much less into the Sinai, to plant similar devices. The word had gone out, from Ben-Gurion himself: under no circumstances were young Israeli soldiers to be put at risk of what had happened to Uri Ilan. He knew that this meant forfeiting the only practical means of obtaining real-time information on what Egyptian or Syrian forces were doing. Any doubt of that would later be erased, in the most dramatic way possible, by Rotem. But he, and the rest of the government, concluded that the price of possible failure was simply too high.

The technical experts did, in the years that followed, manage to develop a slightly more compact bugging device, with a longer battery life. But it was still clear that planting, and servicing, the equipment was going to require infiltration missions every few months. And the word from the top was unchanged. So our military intelligence chiefs, knowing how vulnerable that might leave us, began looking for other ways to plant the devices.

The series of operations which they ran, however, would end up making the tragedy of the Uri Ilan mission seem almost trouble-free by comparison. The first one was devised by a section of the intelligence command known then as Unit 154. It recruited and handled agents from inside Arab countries – a mixture of smugglers, or prisoners we released or traded for captive Israelis. The idea, now, was to use a group of Syrian Druze smugglers. All four of the people chosen came originally from villages on the Golan Heights. They knew the area well. Since they were wanted back home for murder – part of a turf war that had

broken out with rival smugglers – they would be uncommonly motivated to do everything they could to avoid getting caught. And the arrangement actually started promisingly. Rather than risk planting the eavesdropping device straight off, they began with a series of less complex, but still potentially important, intelligence operations. Over a period of months, they managed to bury a range of supplies and equipment in a cave near the summit of Mount Hermon, which had a clear line of sight down towards Syrian airbases around Damascus. The Druze agents in effect set up the infrastructure for a forward observation post, if war broke out, which would give Israeli fighter pilots a critical extra two or three minutes' warning of approaching Syrian warplanes.

Emboldened by this success, the intelligence commanders agreed it was time to have the team install the bugging machinery. Every reasonable precaution was taken. Unlike the Uri Ilan team, the Druze were thoroughly trained and drilled. When they set off, to avoid the risk of their being captured and treated as spies rather than as a military unit, they were given Israeli uniforms, and Uzis. And rather than have them attempt to infiltrate deep onto the Heights, the planners picked a series of telephone poles not far from the agents' native villages.

But they were intercepted. At least, this time, they weren't captured. They got into a gun battle with a Syrian patrol. One of the team was seriously wounded. He survived only because a retreating comrade managed to carry him on his back, west into Lebanon, and then into Israel. Not only he, but the others, were quietly but generously provided for once they returned. But their time as Israeli agents, no doubt to their relief, was obviously over.

For a while, Unit 154's chiefs admitted defeat. But early in 1956, they decided to have another go. This time, they chose what they figured would be a less difficult target: the West Bank. The operation was assigned to what was grandly called Squad Number 10. In fact, the "squad" consisted of a single member: a career burglar named Hussein Mitlaq. He'd been jailed in Israel, but feared most of all being sent back and arrested in Jordan, the scene of most of his transgressions. So we released him. We trained him on how to install the bugging device at the top of a telephone pole and to bury the transmitter. He had obvious natural dexterity, which had presumably come in handy in his earlier exploits. The area chosen was near a village called Harbata, almost due east from Lod. He crossed the border after nightfall. By shortly after midnight, he had managed to install the equipment. And by the time he got back to military intelligence headquarters in Tel Aviv – reporting on how it had all gone smoothly, and how he'd even found a telephone pole near an olive grove that gave him a degree of cover – the bug was actually working.

And it *kept* working. Until about 11 o'clock the following morning. It took a week or so to work out what happened. Apparently, when the owner of the olive grove had arrived the next morning, he saw a tangle of wires trailing down from the main telephone line on the road in front. He called the Jordanian police, who promptly snipped the wires and removed the device from the pole. Luckily for them, they didn't discover the buried transmitter – assuming, that is, that the detonator would have worked this time. Unluckily for Unit 154, the second of its attempts to secure live intercept information had failed.

Strike three came in the Gaza Strip. And it came after Rotem, when not only the intelligence chiefs but the rest of Israel's military establishment could no

longer avoid the need to improve our advance warning of any Arab deployment. Again, the choice of the new mission had some logic. The Egyptians, after all, controlled Gaza. Presumably if Nasser began preparing for war, there would be some sign of it in local military or police communications. We also had a well-established network of agents and informers in Gaza. And the technological department had by now made major advances. Rather than a bulky arrangement including a separate interceptor, transmitter and battery pack, they had come up with a single unit. All that would be required was to climb a telephone pole, replace the existing isolator unit with our own, and connect a few wires. The batteries would still have to be replaced every month or so, but otherwise the operation would be unrecognizably easier than before.

The most experienced and trusted of our Gaza agents was chosen. He was trained for weeks in scaling a telephone pole and attaching the new unit. And then, with something approaching optimism, we sent him into Gaza.

The commanders' hope was to hear real, early evidence that the machine was working – as with "Squadron 10." But they heard nothing at all that first night. In fact, they neither heard from, nor saw, their star Gaza operative ever again. It turned out that he'd been a double agent. Not only did the Egyptians escape being bugged. They also had the latest example of Israeli intercept machinery.

And Israeli military intelligence had run out of options. Except for a unit which almost no one had heard of: Sayeret Matkal.

* * *

Technically, when I arrived in May of 1960, the unit had been up and running for three years. But in its early stages, it had existed only in the mind of Avraham Arnan. He knew, first-hand, the critical importance of having a specially trained unit capable of undertaking intelligence operations across Arab borders. He had been part of Unit 154 when they sent the Druze team, and then Hussein Mitlaq, on their failed missions to try to install the interception devices. Avraham had no illusions about the scale of the task he was taking on when he began piecing together his *sayeret*. The national shudder felt when Uri Ilan's suicide note was made public was still reverberating. It would surely be many months, if not years, before an Israeli government would agree to put other soldiers at similar risk. Still, he was certain that time would come. The point of creating Sayeret Matkal was so that when it did, Israel would at least have a team with the skills and experience and confidence necessary to act.

Sayeret Matkal was also a reflection of Avraham's extraordinary personality. I can still remember late-night conversations we had, years later, when he'd reflect on what he would really have liked to do in his life: become an artist, perhaps, or, even better, a film director. He was a mix of rebel and romantic, and everything in the improvised, often stealthy, early steps which he took to establish the *sayeret* tapped into both of those qualities.

The nearest model in Israel's military heritage was the pre-state Palmach, the elite fighters I'd been dazzled by as a five-year-old in Mishmar Hasharon. Palmach was an acronym – for *plugot machatz,* or "strike forces" – and that phrase described not just how their units trained and operated. It captured how

they *thought*, and how they saw themselves. Its members never numbered more than a few thousand. But they were a breed apart. Beyond the minimal degree of structure required in any military force, they had little patience for hierarchy, and even less for arguments from outside or above about why a particular mission or battlefield strategy wouldn't work. With a self-confidence that sometimes bordered on arrogance, they cultivated the supreme importance of individual intelligence, imagination and initiative. All of these were reflected in the Palmach's version of an officers' meeting. They called it a *kumsitz*, Yiddish for "come and sit". It involved sitting around a table laden with food – typically "borrowed" from assorted nearby kibbutzim or moshavim – and batting around plans, political views or, often, war stories, some of which might even have been true.

The Palmach now no longer existed. Ben-Gurion had disbanded them, along with the right-wing Irgun underground, after 1948. But I have no doubt that there was a generous dose of *kumsitz* during Sayeret Matkal's early months, in 1957 and the first part of 1958. This was before the unit moved into its corner of the old airbase at Sirkin. Avraham had somehow obtained, or diverted, funds from the intelligence budget to rent a sparsely furnished apartment in the heart of Tel Aviv. As best I was able to establish later, this "base" played host to a mix of eating, partying and, above all, talking through his vision for the new unit. I have a hunch that's also where the myth about sneaking into Gaza for a movie and popcorn was hatched.

But there was a seriousness of purpose as well. Avraham knew that for his *sayeret* to have any prospect of succeeding, it would need to demonstrate a range of qualities which no existing Israeli military unit could deploy:

toughness and endurance, of course, but also the myriad of linguistic, navigational and other skills required to infiltrate behind Arab borders, complete an intelligence mission, and get back again. And in order to secure the resources needed to assemble and train such a force, he would have to persuade the army command that he was capable of delivering all of this.

He began by drafting in a trio of Israeli war heroes, and only in part because of the experience and skill set he hoped they could drill into his young recruits. At least as importantly, he wanted them because of the spirit of swaggering self-confidence he was intent on wiring into Sayeret Matkal. The first officer he brought in was Yitzhak Gibli. A teenage Palmachnik at the time of the War of Independence, he was recruited by Sharon into Unit 101, and became a key part of Meir Har-Zion's Company A commando force. Gibli was also the officer captured during Har-Zion's June 1954 attack on the Jordanian base near Qalqilya, prompting Meir to mount his campaign to seize Jordanian soldiers to exchange for his release.

Next to join the new sayeret was Micha Kapusta, another veteran of Unit 101 who fought alongside Har-Zion.

And the final, crowning, addition was Meir Har-Zion himself.

The legacy of Unit 101 and its successor batallion was not without blemish, or controversy. Beyond the issue of civilian casualties, Sharon, and Har-Zion too, acquired a reputation for ignoring the regular chain of military command, and for being a law unto themselves. The tension had come to a head in early 1955, when Meir's beloved younger sister, Shoshana, was hiking with her boyfriend deep into the West Bank, and were killed by Bedouin tribesmen. A

couple of weeks later, Meir set off with three veterans of Company A. They captured six Bedouin. They killed five, and sent the sixth back to tell the rest of the tribe what had happened, and why. Ben-Gurion had, by this time, stepped back, for what would prove only a two-year hiatus, from the Prime Ministership, though he was still Defense Minister. His successor as Premier, Moshe Sharett, was enraged by the reprisal killings, and insisted Har-Zion and the others be arrested by the military police. They were detained, for three weeks, as Sharett, Ben-Gurion, Dayan and others argued over whether to charge and try them. In the end, the refusal of Meir or the others to talk – and the fear of political fallout from publicly prosecuting the country's most admired soldier – led to their being released. Meir's military career ended, in any case, 18 months later, in a firefight during an assault on a Jordanian police station, in which he was shot in the arm and throat. The field medic saved his life, but only by performing an emergency tracheotomy, and he was also left with limited mobility in one arm.

When I first met Meir, the truth is that I can't recall whether I was even aware of his mission to avenge his sister's murder. If so, it was lost in the awe that I felt in his presence, as a teenage newcomer to a unit that was being shaped in the image of the Palamach and Unit 101. Many years later, when as chief-of-staff, I found myself in the same central Tel Aviv office where Dayan had ultimately decided to grant Meir immunity, I could not help wondering what I would have done in his place. The ethical issue went well beyond the ever-present need to manage the tensions inherent in our commitment to "purity of arms". Meir's killing of the Bedouin was not an act of war. It was murder. If something similar had happened on my watch, I was certain that, whatever the

political considerations, I would have insisted on some legal process and punishment. Yet by the time I was running the Israeli military, in the 1990s, it was all but impossible for something like this to happen. And to be fully honest, I was never absolutely sure how I would have handled things in the enormously different circumstances in which the State of Israel, and Dayan, found themselves in the 1950s.

I could certainly see why Avraham was so keen to involve Meir Har-Zion in Sayeret Matkal. Unlike Unit 101 or Company A, we were founded as a pure intelligence unit. We weren't meant to engage in battle across our borders. If a mission went to plan, we would be in and out before anyone knew we'd even been there. And when it came to sneaking back and forth across our borders, no one in all of Israel was better than Meir. No one was more familiar with the terrain of the border areas, and the hills and streams and wadis and desert that lay on the other side.

I was part of the the second group of young recruits to join the unit. Though I was the only lock-picker, almost all of the others had been approached in much the same way as I had been. It was the same way Arik Sharon had formed 101: by word of mouth, trusted friends recommending trusted friends. Even by the standards of 101, however, our training regimen was grueling. We did weapons training, of course, perfecting the use of a standard Uzi, and also working with makeshift silencers that had all the elegance of old automobile mufflers. We did parachute jumps. We worked with detonators and explosives. But by far most of our time was spent on honing the skills that would be the most critical for the role which Avraham hoped we'd eventually fulfill. We *walked*. For hundreds of miles, most of them at night, with fully stocked

backpacks. We worked on our night navigation skills. Before setting off, we would study a map of the area, and commit every town or village or natural landmark to memory. Meir's rule of thumb was that in order to be truly prepared for an operation, you had to spend at least "an hour for an hour" – an equal time mastering the lay of the land to the amount you'd spend in carrying out the operation itself. Every few weeks, despite the continuing ban on Israeli soldiers crossing our borders without explicit prior approval, small groups of us would sneak into Lebanon, or onto the West Bank, and back again. In a triumph of optimism over the political realities, we even went through the meticulous planning of possible operations: including one designed for us to cross onto the West Bank and blow up aircraft in the formerly British, now Jordanian, airport of Qalandia, just north of Jerusalem.

We also studied Arabic, half of us with a teacher specializing in the dialect spoken by Syrians and Lebanese; the other half, learning Egyptian vocabulary and pronunciation. I was in the Egyptian group. Our teacher was an originally Egyptian Jew named Amin. He lived in a working-class corner of Petach Tikvah just over the back fence from our base. He was a lovely man and, no doubt in part because he was also a mathematician and a pianist, we hit it off from the start. He was also nearly deaf in one ear, so we often had to shout so that he could hear us. Languages, to put it mildly, are not my forte. Even in Hebrew, I have a slight lisp, which made mastering Arabic even harder. Still, Amin would often compliment me on my accent, at which point the others would joke that I was lucky that he was hard of hearing. I couldn't argue. They were right.

We not only studied Arabic language. We looked for opportunities to see how well we could blend in with Arabic-speakers without risking being found

out. If we weren't out walking, or learning the details of every part of Israel's borders, we would go out one evening each week to a movie theater in southern Tel Aviv which specialized in Egyptian films. Afterwards, we'd grab a bite at a little restaurant run by an Arab family. We also learned the fundamentals of Islam: its history, its teachings and the basic prayers. Every month or two – on a Friday, when the crowd of worshipers would be large enough for us to blend in – we would go to the great mosque in Jaffa to pray. It was fascinating: getting the rituals just right, being able to say the blessings. With my kibbutz upbringing, I had never, at this point in my life, even set foot in a synagogue. My maiden experience of formal religious practice was as a "Muslim".

And in an echo of the fate of Uri Ilan, we also conducted an exercise to simulate falling into enemy hands. It began, without warning, during one of our navigation treks, a few hours before dawn, when all of us except for a designated lookout were asleep. We were bound, blindfolded, and driven for several hours on a mix of paved roads and bumpy terrain before being led into what I assumed was some kind of military camp. We were held for nearly a week. Physically, it was tough enough: little food, occasional glasses of water, confined, alone, to a tiny room. But there was no way, of course, to really simulate the experience. The main pressure was mental, and psychological. Through hour after hour of interrogation, day and night, broken up only by periods of solitary confinement, telling yourself that *this is just an exercise* was the key. It was not too difficult at the beginning. But with each passing day, it got tougher. I don't think any of us cracked. But I know that there were times that we got close. It did help that we'd been talked through the worst of what could happen in a classroom session weeks earlier: by none other than Yitzhak

Gibli, who, of course, had endured real capture, in a battle with the Jordanians alongside Meir Har-Zion.

Challenging though our training was, I found every bit of it thrilling. After occasional weekends in Mishmar Hasharon, I found that I could hardly wait to get back to Sirkin. This was all the more remarkable because Sayeret Matkal had yet to carry out a single real mission, and there was no sign of that changing any time soon. If anyone other than Avraham had been in charge, I think the unit might have unraveled. Even if it had survived, it would have lost the cutting edge necessary to succeed once it was actually called on to do anything. The fact that neither of these things happened was not because of anything specific that Avraham said, or any explicit management strategy. It was because of the *ethos* he created. We rarely wore uniforms. We called each other by our first names. This informality, the lack of anything resembling normal discipline, and perhaps above all the extracurricular activities which Avraham not only tolerated but encouraged, sometimes made the *sayeret* feel less like a military unit than an old-style American college fraternity house. Or our band of "rogues" back on the kibbutz.

A couple of times a year, we held elaborate feasts in our cavernous training hangar. One of them was near the end of the year, with a purpose that was vintage Arnan: to mark the day in December 1957 when he rented the apartment "base" in Tel Aviv. It was a celebration of the history of a unit with virtually no history. The other festival was in the spring. We called it *chag ha pri*: the Holiday of the Fruit. For weeks ahead, we would mount night raids on kibbutzim in the center and north of the country, during which we would liberate crates of nearly every kind of fruit imaginable. Also, chicken and lamb,

if we got lucky. The only unspoken rule was that none of us participated in an operation against our own kibbutzim. Avraham always invited an unsuspecting selection of senior officers he knew, either from 1948 or from his time at central headquarters. A few of them would get into the spirit of the occasion, like David Elazar, known in the army by his nickname, Dado. He was a Palmach commander in 1948, and one of the few leading Palmachniks to have stayed on in the Israeli army. Later, he would become chief of staff. Now, he was head of the armored corps. That was a particular benefit to us, since we were chronically short of gasoline for our training exercises, and he would periodically divert surplus supplies to us from his tank units.

Other senior officers were more awkward guests. I still remember the look on the face of Chaim Laskov, who had succeeded Dayan as chief of staff and was about to leave the position when he agreed to attend our *chag* in 1961. He gazed on in astonishment, mixed with what seemed to me a helpless urge to flee, at the pyramids of oranges and avocados and mangoes and watermelons. I could almost hear a voice inside his head: these people are *soldiers*, and they're *stealing* this stuff.

I had been given a special pre-feast assignment by Avraham that year. He decided that, particularly if Laskov was going to attend, we should have something "spectacular" on show. He had seen the perfect thing: a billboard at Geha, a major junction on the coastal road north of Tel Aviv, with a huge drawing of Samson holding an automobile tire in each hand. "We need it, Ehud," he said. "Take a team and bring it back." We began with a series of daytime reconnaissance visits, then an initial midnight operation during which we slightly loosened the screws on each of the billboard's six large metal

panels. The next night, we completed the job, carting it all away and reassembling it at the entrance to the hangar.

Fortunately, Laskov had left office by the time we decided the unit needed a kind of clubhouse: a place where we could meet, bring friends, drink coffee, talk, argue, laugh. It was modeled on a Middle Eastern *diwan*, with Persian carpets on the floor and equally colorful cloth decorations on the walls. Ordinarily, of course, a new construction project needed approval from the army authorities, after which they would provide the funds and materials to build it. We did things slightly differently. Each of us had a specific role: design, construction planning, electricity, quality control. Then, we fanned out in teams all around Tel Aviv to secure the materials. Once we had identified a promising construction site, we would either break in at night or stage an operation in which one member of the team would distract the security guards for long enough to allow the rest of us to collect bricks, cement or other material. And within in a few months, we had built our *diwan*. It's still there, in a far corner of Sirkin.

Obviously, each of these ostensible training excursions violated a whole raft of army regulations. They were also against the law. At least one of our training officers, with whom I became a close friend, refused to participate. "I like Avraham," he told me. "But this is *wrong*." I admired him for that. Yet I couldn't help actually enjoying it. And all of us, even my friend, understood the main purpose behind it: to sustain the idea of an elite, operational unit, with the ability to improvise and take initiative, to elude obstacles and challenges without being discovered, at a time when the sum total of Sayeret Matkal's *real* operations was zero.

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Finally, however, there were signs this might change, largely due to a shakeup at the top of the Israeli army. For much of the 1950s, Moshe Dayan's right-hand-man had been a Haganah veteran named Meir Amit. When it came time to name Chaim Laskov's successor as chief of staff, Amit was very much in the mix. He was, at that point, head of operations, in effect the number-two man in the Israeli military. But the job went instead to Tzvi Tzur, who had been Laskov's deputy. So rather than stay on as head of operations, Amit decided to accept the post of head of military intelligence.

He proved the perfect man for the job. For years, he had been helping to run the entire army. He knew, from experience, the importance of intelligence, and the costs of being taken by surprise. He was charming, energetic, self-confident and very bright. He also had clout. If, in his considered judgement, the time had finally come to revive Israeli military intelligence missions, the chances were that it would happen.

It not take him long to come to that considered judgement. He had been at Dayan's side when the first reports came in about the Uri Ilan debacle. He knew about our checkered record ever since in trying to find alternative ways to get intercept information. And his first major move upon taking over had been to authorize the attempt to plant the bugging device in Gaza – the mission which ended up with the disappearance of our "top agent" and our latest bugging equipment.

So the *next* operation, he decided, would be carried out by Israeli soldiers, trained and drilled and briefed by Israeli officers. And in effect, that marked the real start of Sayeret Matkal.

The operations themselves were still some time coming. Yet by late 1961, things began to move. Avraham was not there to see this: he was spending a year in Israel's military staff college. His temporary replacement was Yoseph Castel, chosen not only because he was commander of the Golani Brigade but because, as a member of a long-established Sephardi family, he spoke Arabic. He lacked Avraham's flair. But he had a glittering military record, and an obvious steadiness and competence. I think he'd been with us only a month or so when he called me in, along with three other of the younger members of the *sayeret* and our most operationally experienced commander, a Yemeni named Yechiel Amsalem, and delivered the news we'd all been waiting for. Meir Amit was determined to start running Israeli intelligence operations across our borders. Nothing was imminent, Castel cautioned us. But the technology department had been working flat out to try to improve the hardware. While a finished product was still probably a year or so away, they were focusing on an alternative to the kind of device we'd been trying to mount on telephone poles. Instead, in the wake of the Rotem Crisis, the priority would be to tap directly into the main underground communications cable in the Sinai. Castel wanted Amsalem and our team of four to begin preparing for such an operation.

We started out in Tel Aviv. We were inserted as "apprentices" in a scheme run by Israel's national telephone company. After classroom preparation on how communications cables worked, we were assigned, along with a half-dozen real apprentices, to the hub that controlled most of the phone lines for the central

third of Israel. We spent nearly a month there, learning, through routine maintenance and repairs, how to open the tar wrapping around the thick cables, cut through the steel meshing, then remove another, softer shield to get into the individual wires. After hours, we freelanced: practicing how to connect a "T exit" that would allow us to join the existing wires, one by one, to a second cable, which we would connect to a transmitter.

But the main challenge was going to be getting deep into the Sinai, installing the equipment and getting out again without the Egyptians knowing we'd been there. In our initial training exercise for that part – in the Negev, against our own dedicated Bedouin tracking and reconnaissance unit, the Shaked – we ended up looking less like a crack *sayeret* than Keystone Kops. We took along a dozen others from the unit and split into three small squads, each one ferried in at night by helicopter to a different part of the desert. Our team, Amsalem's, was the one with the most at stake, since we'd been designated to do the actual Sinai infiltration. But we never got started: we were dropped a dozen miles from where we were supposed to be, so far off that the area wasn't even on our maps. The other two units at least had a shot at success. But they, too, failed. They were tracked and found by Shaked within a few hours of sunrise the following day.

Back at the base, we took apart and reassembled so much cable that I had the satisfaction of knowing that, when I left the army, I'd at least have a fallback career with the telephone company. Every few weeks, we headed back into the desert. Not against Shaked. It was pretty clear we'd have no chance to frustrate experienced trackers – and the Egyptians had a similar Bedouin team of their own – until we got a lot more sophisticated in our approach. We did improve,

over time. In unmarked sand, there was obviously no way we could operate without leaving traces. But we developed an elaborate system of approaching our designated target only after deliberately creating tracks elsewhere to hide the real purpose of our mission.

Still, the operation itself was still far from imminent. Any doubt about that vanished when our team held its first meeting with the technological unit, to get a look at the equipment we were meant to take into Egypt. I had no doubt it was a sophisticated piece of machinery. But it was not exactly a triumph of miniaturization. It looked like a refrigerator-freezer. Even if we could figure out a way to get it into the Sinai, in order to ensure transmission back to Israel, the designers had come up with an underground aluminum antenna which was nearly 300 feet long.

None of this dampened the excitement of finally training for something besides relocating fruit, or a billboard. But since my required period of military service was coming to an end, it did prompt me to give serious thought to whether I wanted to stay on in uniform. And if so, how to make sure that I ended up not only making a contribution, but also feeling as challenged, and fulfilled, as I had since joining the *sayeret*.

I would never have traded the past two years for an APC unit in Beersheva. But had I done so, I would by now have taken time off for the usual *kurs maki*, the first step on the officer's ladder, in which a soldier qualifies as a platoon leader. I was obviously keen to stay with Sayeret Matkal. The last thing I wanted to do was to miss out of its first real operational action. But I knew that if there was any prospect of my staying on in the army, I wanted to be giving

orders, not just following them. I needed to find a way, without having done *kurs maki*, to do the full-fledged general officers' training: the six-month training that would equip me to serve in a whole range of military units. I realized there could be no guarantees that if I did so, I would be assigned directly back to the *sayeret*. Yet Avraham was due back in a few weeks. So I was pretty confident he would see to it that that part worked out.

The problem was getting Yoseph Castel to sign off on my doing the officers' course. He was skeptical, and reluctant to say yes. He pointed out that, in any case, I'd have to pass the exam exempting me from the platoon leaders' course that I'd missed.

This was the first time, since ignoring my father's advice on the regional high school, that I knew I'd have to argue my case, and stand my ground, against a figure of authority. I told him I'd given it a lot of thought, and that I was determined to try to do the full officers' training. "I know you've got doubts," I said. "And I respect that. But I have to know your answer, as soon as you can give it to me. Because if it's no, I'll need time to go through the appeal process to see whether I can convince them. Even if that means leaving the *sayeret* and having to go to another unit." He said nothing at first. After a few moments, he replied: "Let me think about it. Give me a couple of days." When he called me back in, he said yes. If I could pass the screening exam, which I did a few weeks later, he would approve my going.

I didn't have to go far. The officers' school was on the main base at Sirkin. But it gave me a taste of what I still had to learn if I was going to stay in, and progress in, the army. It also gave me a real appreciation of the edge I'd been

given in many areas by having been part of Sayeret Matkal. Not just in terms of raw skills, like tracking, or navigating at night. But the experience I'd gained in thinking for myself, taking initiative, looking for the imaginative rather than the obvious answer to an unexpected problem. The confidence to go with my instincts, and to hold my nerve.

And much sooner than I'd expected – in an operation that would turn out to be very different from the one we'd been rehearsing for the Sinai – I would need every one of these qualities.